1: Cohen E-4,5 (1956-1965) 1967 MS14 Kanuri MS14

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The Setting

The Land and the People

FOR AT LEAST a thousand years the drama of empires rising, falling, expanding, and shrinking has been played out in an immense area of Africa at the southern edge of the Sahara known as the Sudan. These states, Ghana, Mali, Songhai, the Hausa kingdoms, Kanem-Bornu, Baghirmi, Wadai, Darfur, and others like them, from the upper Senegal River basin to the upper Nile, form a band from east to west across Africa. Their histories provide some of the most resplendent grandeur of Africa's past. Many of these states have now been consigned to the history books; Ghana and Mali have disappeared although modern countries have resuscitated their names; Songhai was destroyed by the Moroccans at the end of the sixteenth century; the Hausa states were altered as they came under the hegemony of the Fulani Empire of Sokoto at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and little is known as yet about the early states to the east of Lake Chad. On the other hand, Bornu in the northeastern corner of Nigeria has continued its sovereignty in the Chad Basin throughout a millennium of tribulations and triumphs and it goes on today organized as a separate emirate within Bornu Province.

Like most of the Sudan, Bornu is open savannah country, generally quite flat except for a few stable dunes covered with scrub in the north and several long low ridges running northwest to southeast in the southern part of the country. The ridges are probably ancient lake-shores of a great inland sea whose contemporary remnant is Lake Chad—a large shallow fresh water lake into which flow a number of rivers from the south and west. The soil is sandy and covered with scrub bush grass, and scattered trees, mostly thorny ones, except for the large spreading boabab, which dots the horizon here and there. In the 1930s the Nim, a hardy shade tree from India that thrives on the semi-desert conditions of northern Nigeria, was introduced to provide some forest preserves and year round shade in the villages. Here and there, especially at the bottom of the ridges, are large flat surfaces of hard clay that turn into gray-black mud during the rainy season. These provide clay for building materials and pottery, as well as water holes for the cattle of local villages and wandering nomads.

133 south of Lake Chad, into the Cameroons. Here the fingertips of the great Cameroon highland range, steep and impenetrable, extend into the flatlands.

2. The Nature of the Land.

The sweep of the horizon, as one travels in Bornu proper, is unbroken by hills. But as one goes north from Maiduguri toward Geidam, the land perceptibly rises and falls, and in the neighborhood of the town of Geidam these rises become steep. On close examination one notices that the rises are really no more than dunes, their inner consistency concealed by the cov-
137 ering vegetation. The natural vegetative cover here is sparse, limited largely to a profusion of low shrubs and bushes, most of them thorny. Much of the year the grass is brown and parched.
[134] However the sandy soil is fertile. Immediately following the beginning of the rains, early in May, the new shoots begin to grow and soon the thick, coarse grass covers everything. Like the low bushes, the grass brings its harvest of burrs and thistles. In heavily watered places one may see copses of trees, but by far the most impressive tree characteristic of the area is the baobab or kuka (Adansonia digitata). Baobabs are relatively tall, but their huge thickness of trunk gives them a distorted appearance which is heightened by gnarled, twisted, stunted limbs. They grow in solitary splendor, and are used as land marks because of their prominence against the flat line of the horizon. Again, traveling north toward Geidam, one notices that the water

178 of the Kanuri, and the advantages which they have brought are readily understood. Other material changes--the postal system, telegraphs, electricity in Maiduguri, and the Maiduguri airport--only affect a small part of the population in the cities, and consequently are of minor importance.

654 178 Deliberate attempts have been made to institute changes in certain areas of Kanuri culture, with varying degrees of success. Agricultural programs have been introduced through the Bornu Native Authority. Veterinary and Forestry Depart- [743] ments also exist. Dispensaries run by Kanuri Malams exist in the larger towns. There is a hospital in Maiduguri staffed by [757] two European doctors. The Kanuri prefer their own form of treatment and rarely go to the dispensaries or to the hospital when ill. Nor do the Kanuri dispensars themselves have much faith in the medications which they distribute.

E. The Dynamics of Acculturation

101 The town of Geidam, in which the present study was carried [563] out, is in the northern part of Bornu, among a Kanuri sub-group 131 known as the Manga. Geidam is twenty-five miles south of Nigeria's northern boundary, a remote and somewhat isolated town 134 in one of the least developed provinces of Northern Nigeria. It is a town of mud surrounded by a world of sand, and the presence of the desert to the north is felt everywhere, in the land and in the people.

177 Though Kanuri culture is still an integrated and function- 121 ing whole, the influence of the Industrial West is bringing about

425 571 The high proportion of land obtained by political and religious specialists from the political leader reflects the social relations of these informants, many of whom have a close subordinate relationship to followers and supporters of the Lawan of their town.

241 [65.1] [134] Operating costs for rural farm plots are governed by two factors. Firstly, there are tithes (zakat) which all farmers pay to their local political leader as a form of traditional tax. Secondly, there is soil depletion which brings decreasing results for equal effort through [433] time. Thus even with proper planting, weeding and harvesting, the yield on a one acre plot of millet may range from eighty to four hundred pounds of threshed product, while the range for groundnuts is almost as large (one hundred and ten to three hundred and fifty pounds of decorticated 242 nuts per acre). Farm plots are generally used for three to five year 425 571 periods and then left fallow for four to six years. It should be noted that this soil depletion factor tends to activiate the political organization.(1) The farmer requiring new land generally seeks the advice of his local political leader as to whether to clear new bush land or perhaps take up some unused old plot already cleared, if such be available.(2)

423 In summary, land in Bornu can be categorized under four headings: (1) private property, which today refers primarily to house sites in large cities: these are not deeded but they can be rented or sold in a commercial transaction; (2) usufruct property, that is owned because the holder uses it, or cleared it from the bush; this also refers to

[631] (1) Increased numbers in the household operates to the same effect.
(2) In order to avoid the anomaly of a higher political authority having to ask a lower one for favours, in places like Magumeri which house a District Head, a large section of land is set aside for the use of the incumbent D.H. and his subordinates. Thus the followers of the D.H. may apply directly to him rather than the local Lawan for land use rights. N.A. employees have their choice, they may ask the D.H. or the Lawan if they wish to obtain farm plots. In all these cases it is understood that tithing is unnecessary, for none of the persons involved are "peasants of Lawan".

[GEIDAM]

133 [137] [164] desert-like as one moves north from Geidam. The population to the north of Geidam continues to be Kanuri (or Manga), but its density declines rapidly as one moves directly north. Geidam lies on the Yobe River, usually referred to as the Komadugu Yobe River, a redundancy since komadugu means river in the Kanuri language. The Yobe is a slowly moving stream that empties into Lake Chad, approximately 100 miles east of Geidam. Many streams and rivers of the north flow for some months after the rains and then dry up completely. The Yobe, however, is large enough to continue to flow the year round. Before the rains it is reduced to a stream thirty or forty feet in width; after the rains the river reaches its flood crest, when it may extend over half a [505] mile in width. Though one could travel from Geidam to Lake Chad on the Yobe River, the Kanuri do not use the river for travel or [172] for commerce. Along the Yobe river, some twenty miles east of Geidam, lie the ruins of Birni Ngazargamo, the ancient capital of the Mais which was sacked by the Fulani. Hence Geidam is not [36] far from the old center of empire. Along the river, and still further on, along the shores of Lake Chad, are numerous villages and towns.

131 [134] The geographic location of Geidam, aside from the drier sandy nature of the land because of its northern location, is significant because of its situation in relation to Maiduguri, 131 633 491 the provincial capital, and to Nguru, the rail-head. Maiduguri, in the center of the province (see Figure 2), is important both because it is the administrative and commercial capital and be-

[GEIDAM]

491 dam with other towns first skirts the several canteens of the
[366] European trading companies as it enters the town, proceeds
across a wide open area of a mile until it reaches the town
361 proper, and terminates in a parking area. The town itself has
no wall, and no sharp boundary line marks its outer edges. In
three directions, south, east, and north, the town is bounded
by fields of millet, which begin immediately after the outlying
compounds end. To the west of the town lies the river Yobe,
but a strip of land about half a mile in width separates the
[249] river from the edges of the town. In that area are to be found
[134] garden plots, since the land along the river is particularly
[36] fertile, and, closer to the town, stock yards, the slaughtering
[232] area, and the cattle market, with its pens. Northwest of the
town is the tiny adjoining village of Koidi.

361 Southwest of the town, and south of the cattle market, is
648 the Government Reserve Area, a section of land reserved by the
colonial administration in every sizeable town and city where
Europeans are supposed to reside. It is physically set apart
from the African town. In this case, the sole government build-
ing is the Touring Rest house, over a mile from the town, high
on the banks overlooking the Yobe River. Another larger house,
remnant of a time when an army unit was stationed here years
ago, was rebuilt during the course of the year, and occupied
by the Governor-General of Nigeria, Sir James Robertson, during
a brief stay in Geidam. The Government Rest House is occupied
by British administrative officials in their tours of inspection